

Zaō Gongensha Shrine

Zaō Gongensha Shrine is one of the oldest shrines in the Aridagawa region.

It enshrines Zaō Gongen, the deity for which the shrine is named.

Zaō Gongen is the principal deity of Shugendō, a blend of Buddhism and mountain worship that spread throughout Japan during the Heian period (794–1185). The deity is said to have appeared before the founder of Shugendō, En no Gyōja (634–701), while he was training on Mt. Yoshino. Zaō Gongen is a rare example of a deity in the Buddhist pantheon with uniquely Japanese origins. In Aridagawa, the deity is affectionately called “Zō-san.”

Although the earliest records for Aridagawa’s Zaō Gongensha date back to the late 1700s, it is believed to be even older. The current structure dates from 1826, but the copper roofing is more recent. Despite long exposure to the elements at the top of the mountain, some of the original paint remains



on the reliefs carved into the shrine's woodwork.

Many people visit Zaō Gongensha to pray for the return of lost items. Local residents warn that if an item is subsequently found, visitors will have bad luck unless they return to the shrine and offer thanks.

The shrine's main festival is held in early April. Worshippers climb the mountain on foot, bringing with them a large, two-tiered *kagami mochi* ("mirror mochi") rice cake to offer to the shrine. Afterward, smaller rice cakes are tossed from a platform to an eager crowd for good luck.